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ABSTRACT

Intended for administrators and policymakers as well as teachers, this digest examines the current state of the plain English movement, which is an effort to persuade government agencies, businesses, and professional organizations to write in clear, understandable English. After enumerating the benefits that the use of plain English can generate for both organizations and the general public, this digest outlines the plain English movement by (1) describing how the consumer movements in the 1960s influenced federal and state legislation to ensure readability of government and business documents; (2) examining how the plain English movement has affected education, and (3) discussing publications pertinent to the movement. Sixteen references are included. (NKA)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills

ERIC Digest

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The Plain English Movement

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In response to insistence for clear communication, government agencies, businesses, and professional organizations have begun to revise their publications and to write in plain English. The following revised definition in the Southern California Gas Company's utility bill demonstrates the difference that plain English can make.

> Original: "utility users' (city) tax"—a tax imposed upon all utility users in a city, other than gas or electric corporations, using gas that is delivered through mains or pipelines, the tax imposed is on the charges made for such gas.
>
> Revision: "utility users' (city) tax"—a tax charged by some cities for gas used by customers. These cities require us to collect this utility users' tax for them.
>
> (Gray 1986)

The current plain English movement is affecting many areas of our society. It favors the interests of the reader and consumer over the private or organizational interests of the writer. At the same time, organizations that embrace plain English benefit from better internal communication and improved public relations. In outlining the plain English movement, this digest (1) describes how the consumer movements in the 1960s influenced federal and state legislation, (2) examines how the plain English movement has affected education, and (3) discusses publications pertinent to the movement.

How Has the Plain English Movement Influenced Federal and State Legislation?

Consumer advocacy groups in the 1960s stimulated legislation to ensure that government and business produced documents that the public could read and understand (Bowen 1986). The plain English movement gained momentum in the 1970s as Richard Nixon decreed in 1972 that the *Federal Register* be written in "layman's terms" (Lutz 1987). The movement gained national attention in 1978 when President Carter issued an Executive Order "to make Federal regulations clearer, less burdensome, and more cost effective." As a result of that order, the Internal Revenue Service extensively revised the individual income tax form and the National Institute of Education contracted the American Institute for Research, the Document Design Center of Carnegie-Mellon University, and Siegel and Gale (a New York design firm) to conduct and apply research leading to improved design and readability of public documents (Felker 1980). In the Reagan Administration, Secretary of Commerce Malcolm Baldridge has repeatedly emphasized the cost effectiveness of plain English to business and government (Bowen 1986).

The plain English movement has influenced state legislation most strongly. Seven states have passed laws to regulate the comprehensibility of consumer contracts; fifteen have similar legislation pending. In addition, laws have been passed in twenty-eight states to control the readability and usability of life, property and casualty, and health insurance contracts. These laws have one common objective: to ensure that the average person can understand the rights, obligations, and restrictions in various contracts (Bowen 1986).

Plain English laws focus primarily on controlling the word and sentence length in contracts. They also take into consideration elements found in readability formulas that address legibility of the typography, ease of reading due to the interest value of the writing, and ease of understanding due to the style of writing (Klare 1984). In addition, plain language laws have been studied to determine the kinds of language most helpful to consumers and to identify language and design strategies that produce the most usable and comprehensible contracts (Bowen, Duffy, and Steinberg 1986). Such analyses can provide powerful models for future legislation.

How Has the Plain English Movement Affected Education?

For many years, teachers of writing have stressed clear, concise expression. For example, Strunk and White's classic *Elements of Style* (3rd edition, 1979) provided numerous principles and examples of clear writing. The tradition is continued in texts like Macrorie's (1984) *Writing to Be Read*, which calls for economy of expression and tightly organized writing, as in this example:

> Original: The thing that enrages me is mosquitoes inside my open shirt collar.
>
> Revision: Mosquitoes inside my shirt collar enrage me.
>
> (p. 37)

But the current plain English movement has focused specifically on training writers of public documents to use precise and straightforward language. The Document Design Center has two main educational goals: to develop an undergraduate writing curriculum for future business and government workers and to develop programs in clear writing and paperwork management for those currently producing documents.

These goals are shared by many universities and professional organizations. At least four universities offer degree programs in technical writing: Carnegie-Mellon, Minnesota, Washington, and Oklahoma State (Battison 1981). The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), the Conference on College Composition and Communication, the Modern Language Association, the Association for Business Communication, and the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing are among the associations concerned with improving the quality of technical and scientific writing.

The plain English movement is also reflected in the writing of textbooks. Graves (1985) found that students learn more readily from materials prepared by journalists than from those prepared by academics or textbook specialists. Also, texts that depart from plain English by oversimplifying sentence structure (e.g., basal readers) are less comprehensible to children than straightforward materials that are not "dumbed down" (Anderson, Osborn, and Tierney 1984).

An educational group with a different approach to plain English is the NCTE Committee on Public Doublespeak, which attacks the misuse of both oral and written public language. William Lutz, chair of the committee, describes four types of "doublespeak." *Euphemisms*, words or phrases that soften unpleasant realities, can be used to mislead or deceive, as when the phrase "unlawful or arbitrary deprivation of life" is substituted for "killing." *Jargon*, the specialized language of members of a profession, becomes doublespeak when used in addressing (and in fact confusing) nonmembers. In its annual report to stockholders, an airline explained a three-million-dollar loss due to a plane crash as "the involuntary conversion of a 727." *Bureaucratese* refers to the use of a sheer volume of words or complicated syntax to overwhelm audiences. One bureaucrat, testifying before a Senate committee, stated, "It is a tricky problem to find the particular calibration in timing that would be appropriate to stem the acceleration in risk premiums created

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by falling incomes without prematurely aborting the decline in the inflation-generated premiums." *Inflated language* makes the ordinary seem extraordinary, as when car mechanics are called "automotive internists" or electronics companies describe black-and-white television sets as units with "non-multicolor capability" (Lutz 1987). While intensive analysis of manipulative language has historical roots in the general semantics of Korzybski (1933), recent scholarly applications have merged with the popular movement toward plain English.

What Publications Address the Issue of Plain English?

Two periodicals and numerous ERIC documents deal with plain English. *Simply Stated* is a monthly newsletter devoted entirely to issues germane to effective communication. Each issue discusses recent research, highlighting a specific topic such as a breakthrough in teaching writing to law school students or how to improve graphics, and provides notification of upcoming conferences and other events of interest. For further information, write to the Document Design Center, American Institutes for Research, 1055 Thomas Jefferson Street, NW, Washington, D.C. 20007.

The Quarterly Review of Doublespeak deals with the glut of incomprehensible, misleading, and evasive prose that occurs in business, education, foreign relations, education, government, medicine, and the military. Issues usually include examples of doublespeak, book reviews, and articles on specific topics. Each year the Doublespeak committee presents two awards: the Orwell Award for an outstanding contribution to public discourse and the ironic Doublespeak Award for blatant misuse of public language. For further information, write to NCTE, 1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, Ill. 61801.

Following is a sample of the ERIC documents on plain English:

How Plain English Works for Business: Twelve Case Studies (Office of Consumer Affairs, 1984) details the false starts, uncertainty, and internal questioning that occurred as organizations such as Shell Oil, J. C. Penney, and Sentry Insurance initiated projects to simplify consumer documents. The book describes how the projects improved each company's corporate image and, at the same time, streamlined procedures, eliminated unnecessary forms, and reduced customer complaints.

In the technical report *Prescriptive Linguistics and the Case of Whiz-Deletions*, Huckin, Curtin, and Graham (1986) discuss the guideline "avoid whiz deletions" (reduced relative clauses), taken from a highly acclaimed plain English handbook. They argue that the plain English movement should promote only those guidelines consistent with the practices of good writers.

Using the Document Design Approach in Consulting (Brostoff 1985) discusses the Document Design Project as a source of practical materials and plain English methods adaptable to particular audiences. The text contains helpful examples and a checklist for clear writing.

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